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## Students, Universities and Employers: Why We All Win When We Promote Social Justice through SoTL

Jeannette M. Wade

North Carolina A&T State University, [jmwade1@ncat.edu](mailto:jmwade1@ncat.edu)

Anderson Bean

North Carolina A&T State University, [ambean@ncat.edu](mailto:ambean@ncat.edu)

Stephanie Teixeira-Poit

North Carolina A&T State University, [steixeirapoit@ncat.edu](mailto:steixeirapoit@ncat.edu)

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# Students, Universities and Employers: Why We All Win When We Promote Social Justice through SoTL

## Abstract

This essay discusses the benefits of promoting social justice through the scholarship of teaching and learning. We start by highlighting the prevalence of injustices and discrimination (racism, sexism, homophobia, heteronormativity) experienced on college campuses in the US. We go on to highlight the (1) outcomes associated with social justice centered teaching and learning activities and (2) ways this approach makes students more valuable to potential employers upon graduation. We conclude with a call for campus wide promotion of social justice as both micro (classroom) and macro (university) level interventions are needed to truly create equitable learning spaces.

## Keywords

SoTL, social justice, teaching sociology, student outcomes, equity on campus

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## Cover Page Footnote

We would like to acknowledge the attendees of the 2019 SoTL Commons. This essay was inspired by a session on promoting SJ through SoTL.

# Students, Universities and Employers: Why We All Win When We Promote Social Justice through SoTL

Jeannette M. Wade, Anderson Bean, and Stephanie Teixeira-Poit

*North Carolina A&T State University*

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This essay discusses the benefits of promoting social justice through the scholarship of teaching and learning. We start by highlighting the prevalence of injustices and discrimination (racism, sexism, homophobia, heteronormativity) experienced on college campuses in the US. We go on to highlight the (1) outcomes associated with social justice centered teaching and learning activities and (2) ways this approach makes students more valuable to potential employers upon graduation. We conclude with a call for campus wide promotion of social justice as both micro (classroom) and macro (university) level interventions are needed to truly create equitable learning spaces.

## INTRODUCTION

American society is rife with inequalities; examples include racial, gender, sexuality, and class. Structural barriers that are built into social institutions maintain and perpetuate these inequalities. Universities are one of these institutions. Individuals from marginalized groups confront similar, if not the same, barriers on college campuses that they confront in the broader society at large. Disparate access to resources serves as a constant barrier to full participation of all individuals and groups in the decisions that directly or indirectly affect their lives. These barriers are very real on college campuses and have very real consequences.

Achieving equity in society means addressing the root causes of the barriers that create and sustain inequalities. Although aspects of inclusion and inequality remain divisive and controversial, the truth is, having a social justice perspective is vital to classroom and campus success. The following essay will detail the ways in which a social justice perspective has both micro and macro-level benefits for students, future employers and the campus community at large. The goal of this work is to provide a comprehensive resource for use in advocating for the promotion of social justice in pedagogy. It will be especially useful on campuses which have intentionally or unintentionally failed to do so in the past.

## IS SOCIAL INJUSTICE A PROBLEM ON CAMPUSES?

Is social injustice a problem on campuses? The short answer is yes. The amount of harassment and discrimination that students, faculty, and staff experience is well documented in the literature. In fact, Rankin and Reason (2005) found that 84 percent of students experience harassment on campus, whether based on race, gender, class, or other axes of inequality. Critical Race Scholars have also thoroughly demonstrated the adverse effects of covert and overt discrimination students experience in higher education (Brook, Ellenwood & Lazzaro, 2015; Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio & Thomas, 2004; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2012; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009).

Students of color regularly confront discrimination, bias, and prejudice in both academic and social settings on college campuses (Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014; Gin, Martinez-Aleman, Rowan-Kenyon, & Hottell, 2017; McCabe, 2009; Suyemoto, Kim, Tanabe, Tawa, & Day, 2009). This discrimination can be expressed

either in the form of microaggressions and more subtle acts of disregard and contempt or more overt forms of racism like racial slurs and hate crimes (Brook, Ellenwood & Lazzaro, 2015; Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio & Thomas, 2004; Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez & Willis 1978).

In the month of April 2019, there were four high profile racial incidents on college campuses nationwide. At the University of North Carolina, the women's basketball coach resigned after a report was made public that said the coach allegedly told her players (who were majority African American) that they would be hung "from trees with nooses" if their performance didn't improve (Romo, 2019). At Ohio University, a racist video was widely circulated on social media that showed one student reciting the rhyme "One, two, three, four, how many n\*\*ers are in my store" (Fink, 2019). At the University of Georgia, a racist video surfaced showing members of Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity mocking slavery and using a litany of racial slurs. One person in the video is heard saying "pick my cotton, bitch" and another saying "n\*\*er" as many others in the background laugh as these phrases were repeated several times (Gajanan, 2019).

In such environments, students of color experience stress, self-doubt, and exhaustion that impact their academic and social performance, their persistence, and their well-being (Brook, Ellenwood & Lazzaro, 2015; Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio & Thomas, 2004; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). In some cases, higher dropout rates for students of color can even be linked to hostile racial climates on campus (Yosso & Lopez, 2010; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen 1998). Research is increasingly demonstrating that racism and race-related stress are significant barriers that students of color face, making it more difficult for racially minoritized groups to succeed academically. Negative racial climates on campus and discrimination of all kinds are roadblocks to persistence and graduation (Johnson & Arbona, 2006; Gonzalez, George, Fernandez & Huerta, 2005; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Lett & Wright, 2003; Reynolds, Sneva & Beehler, 2010; Utsey, Chae, Brown, & Kelly, 2002).

Research also suggests that individuals who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersexed and/or Asexual (LGBTQIA) frequently experience negative attitudes, harassment, intimidation, discrimination and violence on college campuses (Eddy & Forney, 2000; Berril, 1996; D'Augelli, 1992; Herek, 1993; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Cramer 2002). Homophobia and heterosexism on campus can create a hostile and unsafe environment for LGBTQIA students (Cramer, 2002).

They are also more likely to feel lonely and depressed when compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Westefeld, Maples, Buford, & Taylor, 2001; Cramer, 2002).

Sex- and gender-based discrimination on campus creates unwelcoming environments for female, transgender, and gender nonconforming students (Caplan & Ford, 2014). Subtle microaggressions, sexual harassment, and rape create hostile environments for many students. Similar to racial discrimination mentioned above, sex- and gender-based discrimination that permeates college campuses can be detrimental to academic performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Caplan & Ford, 2014). In Summer of 2019, the U.S. House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology has been receiving testimony on sex- and gender-based discrimination in higher education in preparation for a vote on U.S. House Bill *H.R. 36 – Combating Sexual Harassment in Science Act of 2019*. This bill seeks to prevent and respond to sexual harassment in higher education by both expanding research about sexual harassment among students and trainees and implementing interventions to reduce the incidence and adverse outcomes of sexual harassment (United States Congress House of Representatives, 2019a). In June 2019, Boston University Provost Jean Morrison provided testimony to the Committee about sexual harassment of college students by federally-funded STEM researchers; during this testimony, Dr. Morrison stated:

“You are no doubt familiar with the case that was publicized in *Science* magazine in 2017: an earth scientist at BU was accused of harassing and bullying two of his former graduate students more than twenty years ago at a field site in Antarctica. One student was so fearful that reporting the behavior would derail her scientific career that she waited until she was a tenured professor at another institutions to let BU know what had happened. Following our investigation, we initiated a serious consequence: the BU scientist lost his tenured position and was terminated. This case and its repercussions reverberated powerfully at BU. It was followed closely by the release of the *National Academies report on Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine*, which starkly laid out the terrible costs of gender-based harassment in science, engineering, and medicine.” (United States Congress House of Representatives, 2019b)

Since their 2018 report, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine has been partnering with colleges, universities, and research institutions on an Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education. The Collaborative’s goal is to address sexual harassment by implementing evidence-based policies and practices and promoting system-wide changes to the culture and climate of higher education institutions (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

The evidence is strong that racism, sexism, and homophobia on college campuses have a negative impact on the academic and psychological well-being of LGBTQI students, female and gender nonconforming students, and students of color (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Cokley, 2001; Jackson, Smith, Hill, 2003; Johnson & Arbona, 2006; Lett & Wright, 2003; Lopez, 2005; Eddy & Forney, 2000). There are established solutions, however, and one readily available option is to include a social justice framework in the classroom. Tying lessons—from any discipline—to concerns around equality allows well-represented students to process their biases, under-represented students to share their experiences and develop a

voice, and all students to gain invaluable professional skills and approaches. This makes graduates more employable and more valuable to the legacy of their academic institutions.

## SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE CLASSROOM

The promotion of social justice in the classroom has gained popularity in the past 20-25 years. Schools have transitioned from seeing internships as a time to understand disadvantaged populations to seeing everyday coursework as a time to do so. Several examples of impactful pedagogical activities and programs are detailed in Table 1 below. Each activity resulted from a search of ‘social justice’ within the teaching and learning literature. Original work with active learning ideas are included here.

To summarize the literature, instructors have used several techniques to include social justice in their pedagogy. Stand-out approaches include workshops or seminar classes, applying controversial topics to history or outer space to allow students to talk freely without calling each other out, service-learning activities that focus on students being leaders and innovators—not just interns, and using a feminist lens to lead class discussions. The key benefits to these approaches include allowing students to learn about racism, sexism, and other phobias in a formal setting, producing graduates with real-world experiences in the community, giving voices to marginalized students, and creating a safe space to unpack biases.

## SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE JOB MARKET

Students who have been exposed to social justice in the classroom go on to be well-rounded and highly desired employees. This section addresses the characteristics that make graduates attractive to employers and other stakeholders. Employment involves a match between supply and demand. First, we consider the supply side of the labor market by considering the preparation of students for the labor market. Second, we examine the demand side of the labor market by exploring the hiring decisions made by employers.

**Supply Side of the Labor Market.** To understand the supply side of the labor market, we can examine the top skills that administrators want students to develop during their college experience. Administrators’ priorities for student education are reflected in the mission statements of colleges. Administrators create a mission statement that outlines the goals, purpose, and values of the institution and then develop institutional practices, policies, and resource allocations that advance the mission (Meacham & Gaff, 2006; Strayhorn & Hirt, 2008). In a review of mission statements of institutions listed in the Princeton Review’s *The Best 331 Colleges*, Meacham & Gaff (2006) found that the top five most common themes in mission statements include (1) advancing liberal education (50% of colleges); (2) contributing to the community (38%); (3) enhancing leadership skills (32%); (4) promoting social responsibility (29%); and (5) displaying personal perspectives, values, and moral character (25%). These themes are consistent with major tenets of the social justice framework, which include: “(1) The interrogation of power to establish balance and fairness for the disempowered; (2) The creation of change in society and challenging the status quo; (3) The empowerment of the disempowered by listening to their voices and fostering trans-

| <i>Table 1. Pedagogy and Associated Outcomes.</i>  |   |
|--|---|
| INITIATIVE   | DOCUMENTED BENEFITS   |
| Pre-Freshman Orientation program to tackle race, power and privilege. Limited to White American Students. Involved three-day-long workshops and three evenings with students of color and international students.  | Quantitative improvements in views around racism, privilege, and ethnic identity awareness<br>One student noted, "I thought it was more the other groups were being discriminated against and we were being treated normally when the other races are being treated differently, but so are we. It was very eye opening to realize I've gotten things in life because I was part of the majority" (p.31)<br>(Burke & Banks, 2012) |
| Students used aliens and outer space to simulate the social structures and inequalities that exist in society.   | Students noted that inequalities are socially constructed, not biologically predestined<br>Students noted a desire to transition from being 'politically correct' to being helpful members of society<br>(Parrotta & Rusche, 2011)  |
| One school's attempt to transition service learning from a charity model (I come in and help an agency) to a social justice model (I act as a change agent in the community)   | Students reflected on their biases and privileges when they were unwelcomed in the community<br>Students got to see social structure in real life<br>Students gained professional experience as event coordinators<br>Department and university benefited by building bridges in local communities that outlive students<br>(Lewis, 2004)   |
| Incorporating feminism in the classroom to move students from knowledge consumers to knowledge producers<br>Dialogic- learning through dialogue<br>Participatory- students share personal experiences<br>Experiential-acknowledges the fact that lived experiences vary and allows students to share diverse experiences   | Helps students listen for meaning and become better colleagues<br>Useful as a means of including underrepresented students and giving them experience using their voices<br>(Chow et al, 2003)  |
| Review of outcomes associated with experiential learning activities  | Gained work experience<br>Exposure to diverse populations<br>Self-fulfillment from helping others<br>Chance to apply theories and methodology to real world experiences<br>(Mooney & Edwards, 2001)   |
| Using historical films to facilitate discussions of race in America  | Students begin to transition from learners to teachers<br>Faculty learn what aspects of racism stand out to students - and can follow up with relevant lectures<br>(Jakubowski, 2001)   |
| Evaluation of a mandatory, interdisciplinary first year seminar with a service-learning component.<br>Using every discipline meant students' activities included- remodeling old theaters, assisting at animal shelters, volunteering at homeless shelters, tutoring juvenile inmates  | Students learned- public vs. private issues<br>Taking on the role of "other" (seeing the world through different lenses)<br>Autonomy vs. people's capacity to fight for change<br>(Hironimus-Wendt & Lovell-Troy, 1999)   |
| Students engaged in<br>COMPREHENSIVE SERVICE LEARNING- two-year curriculum with classes and service - including living among local homeless people, Navajos on a reservation and in impoverished parts of Jamaica<br>SERVICE NO LEARNING students who volunteer but not as part of the comprehensive program<br>NO SERVICE control group<br>Each student took a civic responsibility test before and after the process | CSL - had a higher sense of civic duty at wave 1 which grew significantly by wave 2<br>SNL and NS had significant decreases in sense of civic duty by wave 2<br>(Myers-Lipton 1998)   |
| Fall semester student goals<br>(1) community problem solving<br>(2) program development guided by theories and intersectional perspectives<br>Spring Semester goals<br>(1) learn the nature of organizations<br>(2) learn the role of organizations in promoting community change  | Students: gained grant writing skills, engaged in evaluation research, created budgets and strategic plans, ran meetings with various stakeholders, tackled ethical dilemmas, engaged the media<br>Faculty became more creative with lesson planning and more productive with scholarship<br>(Lowe & Reisch, 1998)  |

formative agency; (4) The conservation of culture and productive dialogue and criticism; (5) The notion of equality of opportunity; (6) The promotion of democracy and participatory citizenship" (Strayhorn & Hirt, 2008:205).

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs) also use mission statements to convey a commitment to empowering Black and Latino/a students. In an analysis of the mission statements of seventy HSIs, Andrade

& Lundberg (2018) found that culture was a primary theme in mission statements; nearly two-thirds of mission statements mentioned promoting diverse and multicultural communities, teaching cultural awareness and global citizenship, or appreciating diverse cultures. Administrators at HBCUs and HSIs also identify providing access and opportunity as one of the primary missions of their institutions (Andrade & Lundberg, 2018; Ricard et al., 2008). In interviews, Ricard et al. (2008) found that HBCU

presidents reported that their primary goal was to provide access and enhance opportunities for students to engage in leadership. HBCUs and other minority serving institutions are also more likely to have a community service or service-learning requirement as part of the student learning experience (Commission on Civil Rights, 2010; Patterson, Dunston, & Daniels, 2011). Taken together, these priorities of access, leadership, and service are consistent with the Black radical tradition that promotes the struggle for freedom. Davis (2016) emphasizes the importance of drawing on this Black radical tradition to advance social justice movements. From this perspective, it is imperative to develop global citizens who can critically think about the intersectionality of struggles and make connections between happenings in the world (Davis, 2016). Students who understand the intersectionality of struggles can make connections between social justice issues in the United States – such as the movement against police violence in Ferguson, Missouri – and social justice issues that are happening globally – such as the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement that seeks to end oppression in Palestine (Davis, 2016).

**Demand Side of the Labor Market.** Understanding the skills that employers seek when recruiting and selecting potential employees is critical to understanding hiring decisions. In a Wall Street Journal survey of 900 executives, many executives (92%) considered soft skills equally or more important than technical skills (Davidson, 2016). Surveys conducted by the National Association of College and Educators (NACE) and Hart Research Associates asked employers to rank the most important skills when hiring graduates. In both surveys, verbal communication, teamwork, and written communication were in the top five most important soft skills. Leadership and problem solving were also in the top five most important soft skills in the NACE survey, while ethnical judgment / decision making and critical / analytical thinking rounded out the top five most important soft skills in the Hart Research Associates survey (Hart Research Associates, 2015; NACE, 2015). Although soft skills are in demand, 89% of executives in a Wall Street Journal survey reported difficulty finding potential employees with needed soft skills (Davidson, 2016). The top ten skills that employers believe that college graduates lack include professionalism, relationship building, business acumen, written communications, critical thinking / problem solving, leadership, lifelong learning, teamwork, coaching skills, and flexibility / openness to new experience (Society for Human Resource Management, 2015). Studies suggest that students feel most confident in problem solving, written communication, teamwork, and verbal communication; however, these are the same skills that employers believe that college graduates lack; thus, there is a mismatch between employer expectations and employee abilities with regards to soft skills (Stewart, Wall, & Marciniec, 2016). Service-learning opportunities may be one strategy to enhance the soft skills of graduates. Scholars recommend that HBCUs adopt new strategies to continue to enhance academics while further extending service-learning opportunities to better prepare students for the workforce and civic engagement (Patterson, Dunston, & Daniels, 2011).

## SOCIAL JUSTICE AS A CAMPUS-WIDE INITIATIVE

A pedagogical focus on social justice benefits students, faculty, and employers. A next step for colleges and universities can and

should include promoting social justice as a campus-wide initiative. For institutions of higher education to empower students and to truly thrive as institutions of human and social development, college campuses must be welcoming spaces for all students of all types of backgrounds, races, genders and sexual orientations. This requires a fundamental change in the way that universities function.

We suggest that to move in the direction of rectifying the disparities and inequities that exist on college campuses, university administrations must approach the problem from a social justice perspective. A perspective that seeks to eliminate the constraints that impede marginalized communities from realizing their full potential as students.

Using a social justice framework, there are a few social advocacy considerations that university administrators could consider reducing the institutional effects of racism, sexism, and homophobia and to ensure that all students could succeed. The literature on campus-wide policies to address issues of diversity and racism, sexism, and homophobia on college campuses has grown significantly over the past few decades. Below are a few concrete social justice-oriented strategies, initiatives and approaches in the literature that university administrators could consider.

- Regularly conduct trainings and workshops in cultural competence that emphasize power differentials and microaggressions (Brook, Ellenwood & Lazzaro, 2015).
- Make certain social justice-oriented courses like ethnic and women's studies courses required in the university's core curriculum (Evans & Broido, 2002).
- Expand safe zone/allies' initiatives to contribute to achieving campus learning environments that are accepting of LGBTQIA students (Cramer, 2002).
- Implement joint programs for students and training faculty about the impact of racism/sexism/heterosexist-related stress on students of marginalized backgrounds (Reynolds, 2010).
- Create mental health programs to provide mentoring and counseling around race, gender, and LGBTQIA issues (Vessa, 2015).
- Remove men's and women's restroom labels and/or create gender-inclusive restrooms (Sausa, 2002).
- Require that Resident Assistant (RA) trainings include information about issues facing LGBTQIA students, take courses on sexual orientation and diversity, and be informed of resources for LGBTQIA students (Evans & Broido, 2002).
- Create diversity task forces made up of faculty, staff, and students to develop programming with the goal to create welcoming, inclusive climates on campus (Shelton, 2011).
- Use a goal-oriented approach to affirmative action, where universities can seek and create a more diverse candidate pool, both for faculty and student recruitment, by actively advertising and recruiting in racial minority-focused publications, schools, and networks (Austin, Cain, Mack, Strader & Vaseleck, 1998; Brook, Ellenwood & Lazzaro, 2015).

Students, universities, and employers all win with the promotion of social justice in higher education. Sexism, racism, and homophobia (among other isms and phobias) on university and college campuses are a structural impediment for institutions of higher education's ability to truly flourish as institutions that

empower students. The promotion of social justice on university campuses, whether pedagogical practices in the classroom or campus-wide university policies, provides significant benefits to students, faculty, future employees and the community at large.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Initiatives that ensure that college campuses are safe environments, particularly for those from marginalized backgrounds not only benefit students who would face less harassment, discrimination, and microaggressions thereby improving their learning environments. The university would also benefit because educational outcomes would likely increase. When students succeed, the university succeeds. A pedagogical focus on social justice allows students to confront conscious and unconscious biases, creates an inclusive environment for students from historically underrepresented groups, and produces graduates who are attractive to potential employers and other work-related stakeholders.

According to a recent study of how to improve campus life for LGBTQIA students, after inclusive bathrooms, the most widely cited recommendation was for more training to be offered to faculty, students, and staff (Goldberg, Beemyn, Smith 2019). The respondents claimed that while many universities offered voluntary ally-type safe zone courses, only highly openminded faculty and students selected to take them. Weaving social justice into pedagogy exposes all students, and more instructors, to the lived experiences of marginalized groups in a more in-depth manner. Meaning those who are less likely to take safe zone training would benefit in the classroom. On a similar note, Green (2019) recommended colleges compile listings of courses covering LGBTQIA topics as a way for students in those communities to be engaged in their learning environment. He also claimed that these listings could be used as a starting point for the creation of majors/minors in Queer studies. We would add that the same applies to racial and ethnic studies or women and gender studies. In fact, comprehensive lists can be created, that include all three, and used for the creation of Inequalities or Social Justice minors.

Considering the existing literature on social justice and class activities, there is clearly room to test new approaches and adapt established ones. Courses in all disciplines have room to involve students in their local communities and should do so with justice at the forefront. Additionally, campuses with varied make-ups (from PWIs and HBCUs to women's colleges and religious institutions) would benefit from hosting workshops and seminars on social justice. Finally, we would urge faculty with novel ideas to formally test and publish on successful activities for use by other educators in the collegiate community.

To close, we do not expect universities to right all the wrongs in society, but they can do their part to chip away at the structural barriers that students from marginalized communities face on college campuses. The pedagogical initiatives and university-wide practices and strategies suggested in this article are insufficient by themselves to completely eliminate the structural barriers that university students, faculty, and staff from backgrounds face on a daily basis on campus but initiatives like these, especially if driven by a perspective rooted in a robust sense of social justice, are steps in the right direction.

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